

The Cleveland Barons' NHL Existence Was A Short And Spectacular Disaster

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Bob Whidden got the bad news first. On June 14, 1978, Whidden was in Montreal representing the Cleveland Barons at the NHL owners' meetings.

Whidden had come to Cleveland to play for the Crusaders, a World Hockey Association team, and after they left, took a job in media relations with the Barons, the NHL franchise that had moved from the Bay Area just two years earlier. It had been tempestuous, with changes in ownership, missed payroll, and losing—lots of losing—but Whidden was still unprepared for the news.

“They wanted me outside the door to send news back to Cleveland,” he told me in a 2016 interview. “I figured there was going to be a trade. I sat there for a couple hours and they came out and said they'd engineered a merger.”

The Barons were being folded into the Minnesota North Stars, and a dispersal draft was scheduled the following day. It remains the last time a team in any of the big four North American leagues was blinked out of existence.

“You could have knocked me over with a feather,” Whidden said. “I think I went to the bathroom and threw up.”

When the California Golden Seals, beset by financial problems and unable to get a new arena in San Francisco, had announced their move to Cleveland in 1976, it had seemed like a no-brainer. Cleveland had a passionate sports fanbase and had supported hockey in one form or another for the previous 40 years.

“I thought Cleveland would embrace the team,” said Rich Passan, who covered the Barons for the *Plain Dealer*.

It probably should have worked. It was a breathtaking failure.

In 1967, after a quarter-century of just the “Original Six,” the National Hockey League doubled its size in a single go, adding teams in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, St. Louis, the Twin Cities, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area. There were riper hockey markets than California, but those two teams were added to stave off the growing threat of the Western Hockey League. They were also added to make the league's new TV deal more lucrative for CBS, said Mark Greczmiel, who grew up in the Bay Area rooting for the team originally known as the California Seals.

“What went wrong in Oakland was bad ownership,” said Greczmiel, a broadcast journalist who directed the 2017 documentary [*The California Golden Seals Story*](#). “They were in over their heads running a franchise. Also there was a lot of competition for the sports dollar in the Bay Area.”

The team’s original owner was Barry Van Gerbig, a socialite and one-time minor league hockey player, but in 1970, he sold to Charlie Finley, the insurance magnate who owned the Oakland Athletics. Finley, once referred to by legendary sportswriter Jim Murray as “a self-made man who worships his creator,” stood up at his introductory news conference and said, “I don’t know the first thing about hockey.” He tried to draw fans with gimmicks like an orange hockey puck, and green-and-gold uniforms like the Athletics wore—with white skates! The Seals were especially hurt by the upstart World Hockey Association, which, thanks to Finley’s penury and harsh negotiations with players, lured away seven Seals players and two more prospects in the 1972 offseason. “They took away the core of our team,” says Gilles Meloche, a goalie for the Seals and the Barons.

Finley ended up selling the team to San Francisco hotel magnate Mel Swig, a former collegiate hockey player who was well-connected enough that plans started to materialize for a new arena in San Francisco. When those plans fell through, Swig—who was already losing millions of dollars on the Seals—started looking for a new home. Minority owners George and Gordon Gund sold him on Cleveland.

For nearly 35 years the city had been home to the Cleveland Barons, an American Hockey League team that had been billed, not without reason, as the seventh-best hockey team in North America, trailing just the NHL’s Original Six. In fact, after the team won its fourth Calder Cup in a decade in 1953, Barons owner Jim Hendry sought a best-of-five series against the Stanley Cup winners, promising at least \$20,000 in revenue from the games in Cleveland.

It wasn’t just hot air. Barons tickets were the hottest in town—no mean feat in the 1940s, when the Indians were setting attendance records and the Browns were a dynasty—and the Cleveland Arena, originally pitched as a home for the Montreal Canadiens when they were considering leaving Quebec in the 1930s, would host crowds of over 10,000 on Saturday nights, with fans sitting in the aisles.

“They sold out the arena every night in the 1940s and 1950s,” said Passan, who covered the AHL Barons as well.



Mike Chernoff of the AHL Cleveland Barons scores against Providence Reds goalie Ross Brooks in a 1970 game. Photo: Paul Tepley ([Cleveland Press via the Cleveland Memory Project](#))

But the city and the NHL could never quite make a partnership work. Barons owner Al Sutphin turned down an NHL invitation in the 1940s, fearing the Barons' departure would lead the AHL to fold, and the NHL rejected the Barons when they applied in the 1950s.

In 1972, Nick Mileti sought an expansion team. Mileti had bought the Cleveland Arena (and with it, the Barons) in 1968 and, two years later, filled it with an NBA expansion team, the Cavaliers. He was denied by the NHL, but he became the owner of a WHA team, the Crusaders. Mileti then sent the AHL Barons into oblivion. They played just one year in Jacksonville before folding.

The Crusaders were just the latest piece in Mileti's local sports empire. By 1972, he also owned the Cleveland Indians, and was making plans for a replacement for the Cleveland Arena, then in decline and in a less-than-stellar neighborhood on Euclid Avenue, just east of downtown. (Former Cavs coach Bill Fitch once said, "We led the league in stolen cars.")

Mileti first looked to downtown, at a location between the East Ninth Street Pier and Cleveland Stadium—the current location of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame—but when that deal couldn't get done, he found a piece of property owned by Gulf Oil in Richfield Township, 23 miles from downtown Cleveland. In 1974, the Richfield Coliseum opened with a concert by Frank Sinatra and became the new home for the Cavaliers. The location would turn out to be a fateful decision.

The Seals' move to Cleveland was announced in June 1976. "I thought I was going to play in California," said Mike Fidler, the Seals' first-round pick out of Boston University earlier that month. "I didn't even know Cleveland was a consideration. I found out after I signed my contract."

The team's name and logo were announced the following month. Swig got the rights to the Barons name from Mileti by picking up the check at dinner one evening.

“When they announced the move, I was driving over the Bay Bridge and I almost drove off,” recalled Seals and Barons goalie Gary Simmons. “It was a terrible experience to go from a place that when you get done practicing you can go golf or go to San Francisco where there's so many things to do, to a place where the rink is 26 miles out of town and it's about 40 degrees [colder].”

Simmons, nicknamed “Cobra” for the snake painted on his goalie mask, returned to California in January 1977 after he was traded to the Kings to back up future Hall of Famer Rogie Vachon. “They did me a favor trading me to Los Angeles. I knew it was the end of my career, but I was still glad to get out of there.”



Gilles Meloche makes a save. Photo: Paul Tepley ([Cleveland Press via the Cleveland Memory Project](#))

On the night the Barons opened, the flag bearer tripped over a microphone cord. It was an omen. The Barons and Kings played to a 2-2 tie in front of 8,890 fans. A November game against the Canadiens, then the class of the NHL, drew 11,000 fans, which presented its own problems. The Coliseum had one way in and one way out. Simmons said what should have been a 20-minute drive home for him took nearly an hour.

“It was a beautiful building, but if you had more than 10,000 people show up, nobody could get in or out,” Meloche said.

Most nights, that wasn’t a problem. The Seals had drawn around 8,000 a night in Oakland. That was almost unattainable in Cleveland.

Because the team had announced its relocation only four months before opening night, there was no time to establish a significant base of season-ticket holders. And the Coliseum’s location in Richfield severely cut down on walk-up sales. Brutal Cleveland winters (both seasons the Barons were in town saw especially harsh January blizzards) also helped to depress attendance.

“We had this huge arena, and it was empty all the time,” said former Barons player Rick Hampton. “All you saw were the ushers. That wasn’t very encouraging.”

“You could hear the players shouting on the ice,” Passan remembered. “When the crowd’s small enough that you can hear the players, something is wrong.

“And the club just wasn’t that good either.”

By Feb. 1, the team was 15-28-8 and drawing fewer than 5,400 fans a game, by far the least in the NHL. The Barons were so awash in red ink—the month before, when asked how much in financial losses the team could sustain, Swig told a reporter, “You can’t count that high”—that they were unable to make payroll. Rumors swirled that the team was going to move again, or even fold.



Photo: Ron Konty ([UPI, via the Cleveland Memory Project](#))

“It was ugly,” Fidler said. “Everyone was unhappy. We almost hoped they *wouldn’t* pay us so we could become free agents.”

But the NHLPA made a loan to the team and along with an infusion of cash from Swig and the other owners, the team would stay afloat for the remainder of the season. Swig had had enough, though. That June, he finally sold the team to the Gunds for \$5.3 million, including \$1.8 million to pay off Finley for his brief ownership of the franchise when it was in Oakland. “Finley actually turned a profit owning the Seals,” Greczmiel said.

The Gunds were Cleveland natives (their father was the president of the Cleveland Trust Company bank) and both passionate hockey fans who were more than willing to get involved. Vern Stenlund, the Seals’ second-round draft pick in 1976, recalled checking into the Holiday Inn for training camp, and when he announced he was with the Barons, a man standing nearby came up and introduced himself. It was Gordon Gund.

“George Gund used to call my father during the summer,” Fidler said. “They really connected with the players.”

But even the Gunds couldn’t turn things around. Attendance continued to lag, thanks in no small part to a 15-game winless streak in February and March, and the Barons agreed to merge with the North Stars at the end of the 1978 season.

“I think I read about the move in the *Boston Globe*, but that wasn’t unusual,” Fidler said. “That’s how I found out I got drafted: I read it in the *Globe*.”

The Barons had gone 47-97-26 in their two seasons of existence. Within two years, the North Stars were a playoff team. The year after that, they advanced to the Stanley Cup Finals.

“We had some good hockey players,” said Dennis Maruk, one of two All-Stars in the Barons’ brief history. “I think the frustrating part was not knowing if there was going to be a future in Cleveland. To mold a team takes time, and there was a lot of insecurity.”

Meloche’s lasting memory with the Barons came at the Coliseum, but not on the ice.

“I got to see Elvis Presley in concert,” he said. “We had great seats, right by the stage.”

The players called the Coliseum a great building in a bad location.

“If it was downtown, would Cleveland still have an NHL team?” asked Maruk, who [went on to score 60 goals in a season](#) with the Capitals. “I can’t answer that, but I think downtown would have given the team a better chance.”

Ironically, in 1994, the Cavaliers abandoned the Coliseum for a new home downtown named for its owners George and Gordon Gund, who had bought the team from Ted Stepien in 1983 and

returned it to respectability. The Coliseum was torn down in 1999, and the land it sat on is now part of Cuyahoga Valley National Park.



Al MacAdam, Walt McKechnie, and Gilles Meloche. Photo: Paul Tepley ([Cleveland Press, via the Cleveland Memory Project](#))

By then, the Gunds also owned a new NHL team, the expansion San Jose Sharks, who returned the NHL to the Bay Area after its disastrous era 20 years earlier. And the Gunds made sure to put a minor-league team in the new arena downtown. Cleveland's had a hockey team playing at the Gund (now Quicken Loans) Arena virtually since. Today it's the Monsters, and Barons sweaters—red from their NHL days or blue from their AHL days—can still be spotted at Monsters games, even though Ohio has had the Columbus Blue Jackets since 2000.

The Barons' name won't go away either. One of the Sharks' farm teams that played in Cleveland was the Barons, and it remains the name of a youth hockey program in the area.

Stenlund, whose NHL career lasted all of four games with the Barons, became a college professor and . He's working on a second volume, and spotted a familiar sight when he was walking through the Detroit Airport on his way to a meeting with Orr.

“I saw a kid with a bag with a Cleveland Barons logo on it,” Stenlund said. “I told him that I played for the Barons and his eyes lit up. He smiled and I said, ‘It’s great to see that logo. Keep on trucking.’”

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